



## *Vision and Viewpoint*

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### **Can prayer be "taught?"**

There are books aplenty written on the subject of prayer, of course, but I have come to the point where I doubt that anybody can really "teach" anybody how to pray. That, I figure, is what life does. We can learn prayer forms, of course, but we do not learn either the function or the purpose of prayer until life drags us to it, naked and in pain.

Theologians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were very good at dissecting prayer. There was spoken prayer, silent prayer, prayer of the mind, prayer of the heart and union with God, they told us. And approximately in that order, if I remember correctly all the manuals I read on the subject. It all seems pretty amusing to me now. I was trying to learn to pray exactly the same way I learned to run a printing press. By the book. In both cases I discovered that the only way to learn to do it was to do it for a long, long time.

Most important of all though, at least for me, was the line in the Rule of Benedict that instructs the monastic community to keep prayer brief and the monastics to leave chapel quietly so that anybody who wants to stay behind for private prayer can do so without interruption. In those two simple statements I learned enough about prayer to last a lifetime: first, that in order to learn to pray we need to do it regularly. And second, that real contemplative prayer starts where formal prayer ends.

When we have prayed prayers long enough, all the words drop away and we begin to live in the presence of God. Then prayer is finally real.

When we find ourselves sinking into the world around us with a sense of purpose, an inner light and deep and total trust that whatever happens is right for us, then we have become prayer.

When we kneel down, we admit the magnitude of God in the universe and our own smallness in the face of it. When we stand with hands raised, we recognize the presence of God in life and our own inner glory because of it.

All life is in the hands of God. Even the desire to pray is the grace to pray. The movement to pray is the movement of God in our souls. Our ability to pray depends on the power and place of God in our life. We pray because God attracts us and we pray only because God is attracting us. We are not, in other words, even the author of our own prayer life. It is the goodness of God, not any virtue that we have developed on our own, that brings us to the heart of God. And it is with God's help that we seek to go there.